Setting standards in language testing and assessment: past, present and future: the impact of the CEFR

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- Some terms
- Quality in language learning, teaching and assessment instruments decisions
- Transparency and Accountability
- The CEFR
What is a standard?

- A principle of honesty and integrity.
- An authoritative exemplar of perfection.
- A definite level of excellence or attainment.
- A recognised degree of proficiency.
- The measure of what is adequate for a purpose.
- A norm of comparison or judgement.
What is a standard?

- A **principle** of honesty and integrity.
- An **authoritative exemplar** of perfection.
- A definite level of **excellence or attainment**.
- A **recognised** degree of proficiency.
- The measure of what is **adequate for a purpose**.
- A norm of **comparison** or judgement.
The past

- Beginner
- Fase Beginner
- Elementary
- Early-Intermediate
- Intermediate
- Upper Intermediate
- Advanced
- .../...

Exam “X”
• CEFR
• ACTFL
• ACTFL NCSSFL can dos
• Canadian Benchmarks
• ASLPR - Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings
• CEFR – J
• CSA
..../..
The CEFR in history

The Major Project in Modern Languages
Council of Europe 1964

Threshold 1990
Council of Europe
Conseil de l’Europe
J. A. van Eik and J. L. M. Trim

The Ruschlikhon Symposium 1991
Transparency and coherence in language learning in Europe

Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR
Language Policy Division
www.coe.int/lang

CEFR Companion Volume with extended illustrative descriptors
Education Department
September 2017
Impact

- Translated into 40 languages.
- Used in language policy, curriculum design, textbook (all education levels, beyond Europe).
- Used in language testing and assessment.
- Used in international projects (Dialang, Surveylang, ...).
- Triggered research and discussion.

Although..
- Not yet used to its full potential.
Issues and criticisms

- Adoption → Adaptation
- PLD (Performance level descriptors) → PLL (Performance level labels)
- Reification

- Practitioners - not accessible/user-friendly, imprecise descriptors -> objectives
- SLA - language proficiency re. language development
  - language proficiency re. cognitive abilities
- Testers - missing/unbalanced scales & descriptors
  - underspecification
Reactions of the Council of Europe

• Recommendations -> Policy makers

• Toolkit -> Practitioners

• Companion Volume -> Wide audience (?)
Recommendation CM/Rec (2008/7)

Of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the use of the Council of Europe’s CEFR and the promotion of Plurilingualism  
(*Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 2 July 2008*)

General principles and measures to be implemented by authorities responsible for language education at national, regional and local level.

Specific measures aimed at policy making, curriculum and textbook development, teacher training and assessment.

Appendix

Explanatory Notes
The CEFR toolkit and resources

www.coe.int
The Manual offers guidance to users on how to

• Describe their examination coverage, administration and analysis procedures;
• Relate results reported from the examination to the CEFR levels presented in Chapter 3 in the CEFR;
• Provide supporting evidence reporting the procedures followed to do the above.

(Manual 2009: 2)
# Building an argument

## Familiarisation with the CEFR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPECIFICATION</th>
<th>STANDARD-SETTING</th>
<th>VALIDATION</th>
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| Description and analysis of the test quality  
  - General examination content;  
  - Process of test development;  
  - Marking, grading, results;  
  - Test analysis and post-examination review | Standardisation of judgments  
  - Training in assessing performances in relation to CEFR levels (using illustrative samples)  
  - Training in judging the difficulty of test items in relation to CEFR illustrative items | Test validity  
  - Content validity  
  - Operational aspects (in pre-testing, piloting)  
  - Psychometric aspects |
| Description of the test in relation to the CEFR  
  - Overall estimation of examination level;  
  - Communicative activities tested;  
  - Aspects of communicative language competence tested;  
  - Graphic profile of relationship of the test to CEFR. | Judgment sessions  
  - Benchmarking local performance samples to CEFR levels  
  - Assigning local items and tasks to CEFR levels | Standard setting validity  
  - Procedural validity  
  - Internal validity  
  - External validity |

Documented CLAIM of link to CEFR on the basis of specification  
Documented CLAIM (on the basis of specification and standardisation)  
Documented CLAIM (confirmation on basis of empirical verification)
Policy Definition of Standard

Agency that Calls for the Standard

Policy Definition of Standard

Elaborated Description

Test Design and Content

Translation of Policy and Elaborated Content to Value on Test Score Scale

M. Reckase 2008

Standard Setting
What is standard setting?

Standard setting is a general label for a number of approaches commonly used to identify test scores that support decisions about test takers’ (candidates’) level of knowledge, skill, proficiency, mastery, or readiness.

Standard setting, according to Cizek (1993), is “the proper following of a prescribed, rational system of rules or procedures resulting in the assignment of a number to differentiate between two or more states or degrees of performance” (p. 100).

Fundamentally, standard setting involves the development of a policy about what is required for each level of performance. This policy is stated in the performance standards and implemented through the cut scores.

Cizek and Bunch (2007) summarized the judgmental nature of standard setting thus:

“To some degree, then, because standard setting necessarily involves human opinions and values, it can also be viewed as a nexus of technical, psychometric methods and policy making”

Tannenbaum and Wylie (2008:2)
How do test content and performance level descriptors match?

How does difficulty relate to performance levels?

What should inform decisions on cut scores?
Research Evidence
How do I know my B1 is your B1?
Is my standard your standard?

What’s your B1 like?
What’s your standard like?
“It is imperative that examinations today are

- Honest
- Reliable
- Valid
- Transparent
- Portable “

John Trim’s address at the ACTFL-CEFR Conference in Provo, USA.
August 4th, 2011
1. Have issues of test quality and impact been fully addressed? (see EALTA Guidelines Section C). Is information on the quality of the test publicly available?

2. Are those involved in test development all familiar with the CEFR? Have familiarisation with the CEFR procedures been followed? What evidence is there of the procedures followed and the corresponding results?

3. Have the test content and the test specifications been analysed in relation to the CEFR descriptors? What evidence is there of the procedures followed and the corresponding results?

4. Have standardisation procedures been completed for written and spoken performances? Which ones? By whom? What evidence is there of the procedures followed and the corresponding results?
5. Are local performance samples benchmarked to the CEFR publicly available?

6. Have standardisation procedures been completed for test items targeting receptive skills? Which ones? By whom? What evidence is there of the procedures followed and the corresponding results?

7. Are local CEFR-linked items and tasks publicly available?

8. What standard setting procedures have been used to establish cut-off scores for the relevant CEFR level(s)? How many judges have been involved? Is there a standard setting report publicly available?

9. Has validity evidence been collected covering the process of linkage? Is it publicly available?

10. Is there a scheme of level setting that guarantees quality standards and linkage to the CEFR? Is it publicly available?
The future

- Recommendations -> Policy makers
- Toolkit -> Practitioners
- Companion Volume -> Wide audience (?)
“It is important to note that the additions do not impact on the construct described in the CEFR, or on its Common Reference Levels. The Companion Volume, and in particular the descriptors for new areas, represent an enrichment of the original descriptive apparatus.” CV 2017:22
• How can a real and stronger impact of the CEFR in the classroom be achieved? Will the CEFR Companion Volume facilitate it?
• How will the changes, additions and new scales impact Teaching. Learning and Assessment?
• What difficulties can be predicted?
• What can be done to make the CEFR CV more accessible to practitioners?
References

• Figueras, N. and Noijons, J. (Eds) (2009). Linking to the CEFR levels, Research Perspectives. CITO, Council of Europe and EALTA.  www.ealta.eu.org/resources. html


